SOME ASPECTS OF THE LAST DAYS OF THE MOHAMMADAN RULE IN PURNEA DISTRICT

BY

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At the end of the 12th century A. D., the Mohammadans under Bakhtiyar Khilji swooped down upon Bengal and soon their rule was established over Purnea, but we get no accounts except a vague and incomplete list of the *Faujdars* of the district till 1722 A. D. when Saif Khan, 'a lord of the rank of seven thousand horses, and a son of Emir Qhan, the famous Viceroy of Cabool'[1] became the Faujdar of Purnea. He made conquests towards the north and west of the district and 'thus enlarged the country and its resources and day by day the strength of his government, of his finances and of his army increased'.[2] Saif Khan was succeeded for few months after his death in 1748 A. D. by his worthless son Fakhruddin Hussain Khan, who was soon replaced by Saiyad Ahmad Khan, the nephew and son-in-law of Nawab Alivardi Khan of Bengal. He consolidated the good work done by Saif Khan and successfully endeavoured to promote 'the comfort and welfare of his subjects, both nobles and husbandmen'.[3] With the death of Saiyad Ahmad Khan in 1756 A. D. Purnea passed from one age to another in the sense that the period of 34 years since 1722 A. D. in the history of the district was a period of acquisition and prosperity and the succeeding one of about 14 years till 1770 was that of loss and decay. This latter period forms the subject matter of the present article.

The ball was set rolling by Shaukat Jang, the son and successor of Saiyad Ahmad Khan, whose administration was responsible for involving Purnea in the futile war against Sirajuddaula, the Nawab of Bengal. The two princes were grandsons of Alivardi Khan and both wanted to be firmly saddled on the masnad of Bengal. In the process they measured swords in the Battle of Baldiabari (four miles north of Manihari in the present district of Katihar) on 16 October 1756 A. D. and as a result while Shaukat Jang was killed, Sirajuddaula was considerably weakened

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1 Khan, Ghulam Hussain—Sair-ul-Mutakharin, Vol. II, Calcutta (1902), p. 73.

2 Salim, Ghulam Hussain—Riyaz-us Salatin, Calcutta (1902), p. 37.

3 Sair, Vol. II, p. 141.

to face the impending challenge of the British who ultimately triumphed in the Battle of Plassey. Thus, the event proved disastrous both for Purnea and the whole of Bengal which were engulfed in midnight darkness.[4]

After Plassey began a period of political revolutions not only in the provincial capital of Bengal, but also in the farflung area of Purnea. The district witnessed amazingly frequent changes in the administration. The Faujdars were appointed neither on account of their merits for the post nor were they removed because of their inability to run the administration, the guiding principle in this respect was the capacity of the Faujdar to play to the tune of the provincial governor, who in turn was a mere puppet in the hands of the East India Company. The Subadars and the Faujdars felt that their existence depended on their ability to collect as much revenue as they could.[5] A brief survey of the administration of different Faujdars during the period will show how Purnea was squeezed financially by them to fulfil the requirements of their mentors, the provincial governors.

The long but unimpressive list of Shaukat Jang's successors include Mohanlal, Hazir Ali Khan, Khadim Hussain Khan, Raja Suchet Rai, Raziuddin Muhammad Khan and Muhammad Ali Khan. From the fact that no less than eight rulers changed hands in Purnea in just about 13 years it can easily be inferred that the tenure of office of these rulers was so short that it was impossible for them to devote their attention to the welfare of the people, no matter whether they had an intention to do so or not.

However, the most disturbing thing during this period was the trend to drain out the wealth of the district. It first started in the time of Mohanlal, the Deputy of Sirajuddaula who became the Faujdar of Purnea after the death of Shaukat Jang. Although Mohanlal regulated the administration and the finances and established order in Purnea, yet the few days that he remained in the district, he mostly spent in collecting wealth and property including fiftyone elephants and many horses and camels[6] as well as women and children belonging to the deceased, or to his father Saiyad Ahmad Khan, and despatched them all to Mursidabad.

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4 Sair, Vol. II, pp. 202-213.
—Riyaz pp. 367-369.
—Stewart Charles—The History of Bengal, Delhi (1971), pp. 506-510.

5 Sinha, Narendra Krishna—The Economic History of Bengal, Vol. II, Calcutta (1962), p. 35.

6 Riyaz, p. 369; Sair, Vol. II, p. 218.

In subsequent years this trend assumed gigantic proportions and according to the first English Supervisor of Purnea, G. G. Ducarel, this economic drain without proportionate returns was one of the major factors that impoverished Purnea. Ducarel in course of his evidence in person before the Board in July 1775 A. D. said that the company spent the revenues of the provinces mostly on the maintenance of the troops and on an investment for Europe. Since there were no troops near about Purnea and there was also no manufacture of importance in Purnea,[7] the district should not have been made to suffer by draining out its resources on these accounts. Now no longer 'what was collected here was spent here'[8] as in the days of the great Faujdars Saif Khan and Saiyad Ahmad Khan, but a major portion of the entire collection of revenue in Purnea flowed out of the district.

Another feature of this period was that some of the Faujdars were rivals of the subadars for the *masnad* of Bengal, which often dragged them into uncalled for wars. It has already been shown that Shaukat Jang had most thoughtlessly involved Purnea into war against the Nawab of Bengal. In May 1760 A. D. Khadim Hussain Khan, then Faujdar of Purnea, also revolted against the Nawab of Bengal and made preparations to join the Imperial force under Shah Alam who had invaded Bihar.[9] He raised an army of 6,000 cavalry, 10,000 infantry and 40 big and small guns. He built up a full treasury and a numerous artillery. His army included selected men. But in order to raise his troops, he extorted money from all he could get in his power, whether high or low. He confiscated the property and levied heavy contributions on the zamindars. It is recorded that, 'Khadim Hussain Khan plundered every part of the province without mercy and left the merchants, zamindars and principal inhabitants in a state of bankruptcy and poverty from which they have never recovered'.[10] To quote the words of Ghulam Hussain Khan, the celebrated author of Sair-ul-Mutakharin,

> 'Such violences made his administration odious, and rendered his person an object of taunt and reproach; but he

7 Ramsbotham, R. B.—Studies in the Land Revenue History of Bengal, 1769-1789, London (1926) pp. 69-70.

8 Proceedings of the Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, dated 13th December 1770, Purnea Letter No. 118.

9 Sair, Vol. II, p. 349.

10 Proceedings of the Controling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, dated 26th August 1771.

seemed to pay little attention to it, and indeed, he had not delicacy enough to feel the detestable part he had chosen to act; and, provided he made much money, he little minded the detestation of an incussed public.'[11] Khadim Hussain Khan never succeeded in settling his scores with the Nawab of Bengal;on the contrary his adventure proved fatal for him and he had to abandon his seat at Purnea. All the same, he did considerable harm to the economy of Purnea in the process.

The most characteristic feature of the period in Purnea, as indeed everywhere in Bengal, was that the people were made to suffer at the hands of the Faujdars themselves. It has already been shown how Khadim Hussain Khan plundered the land and people of Purnea to the maximum. Mir Rohiuddin Hussain Khan did not lag behind. Though when he overthrew Sher Ali Khan, the immediate successor of Khadim Hussain Khan, and establlshed himself in Purnea; the people of the district generally welcomed him as their master and expressed their joy at his accession as he was a son of Saif Khan and son-in-law of Saiyad Ahmad Khan and as he treated both the people and gentry with utmost benignity, in the beginning of his reign,[12] yet very soon he alienated his people as he was overcome by thoughtlessness and indolence and his excessively intriguing and ill-natured associate Asghar Ali Khan continually oppressed both the farmers and the soldiers. He spent lavishly in the company of the dancers of both sexes, singers, fortune-tellers, farceurs, and such other people. Consequently, the revenue of the district languished and on complaint from Muhammad Reza Khan, the Deputy Governor of Bengal, the Council at Murshidabad dismissed him from his office.[13] In the meantime the East India Company obtained Diwani rights over Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and deputed Raja Suchet Roy as Faujdar of Purnea in 1765 A.D. This new ruler also was extremely unscrupulous as an administrator of revenue in the capacity of Amil. He laid heavy assessments on the Ryots without regard to the *Putta* or Agreement.[14] Suchet Roy had little regard for the welfare of the husbandmen who were tremendously vexed by the heavy charges of collection. He had also recourse to fines and other

11 Sair, Vol. II, p. 256.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 514-517.

13 *Ibid.*, Vol III, pp. 30-32.

14 Proceedings of the Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, dated 13th December, 1770.

means of oppression for realisation of the increased amount, but the effect of these measures was definitely detrimental to Purnea revenue.[15] The people were oppressed not only by *Faujdars*, but also by various revenue-collecting agencies under them. In order to satisfy their own interests the revenue collectors realised from the tenants various collection charges and other imposts which were arbitrary, vexatious and burdensome. Heavy charges of collection leading to high revenue assessments, which Ducarel terms as 'destructive rates of rent', greatly harassed the *raiyats*. The *zamindars*, *Talukdars* or other revenue collectors at the village and *Pargana* levels realised *Nazranas* and *Salamis* or presents, *Ijardaree* or revenue farmers' fee and interest for money borrowed by the revenue farmers to pay their instalments of revenue and so on. Several other charges, viz. the charity charges, meant to be distributed among different families who claimed it by virtue of *sanads* or patent to be distributed among the clerks of the treasury, the *Nankar* or subsistence allowance to be paid to the zamindars and the Kanungoes, the Sepoy charges to pay for the country troops, the additional cess called *Bhoni* and *Gunds* and the imposts like *Rose Piyada* or daily allowance to the peon and *Khoraki* or victuals etc., were realised from the *raiyats* at the *pargana* level. The *Abwab Faujdary* was an additional impost which consisted of fines realised by the revenue farmer as a court of justice. These charges amounted to Rs.12/—or Rs. 14/—lacs out of which Rs. 2½/—lacs were attributed to Sepoy charge alone. These charges were simply harassing to the cultivators.[16] Not only this, on account of the extortion and injustice practised by the revenue-collecting agencies' the cultivators practised concealment and evasion which deprived the Government of its just demands.[17] These agencies were also free from the fear of any audit or investigation. Once in 1761, Nawab Mir Kasim in order to meet the increasing demand of the East India Company and the growing pressure on account of wars undertook an investigation of the collections made by the zamindars, but 'the financial operations of the state in discovering the genuine collections made throughout the country, descended no further than the Faujdar'.[18]

The *zamindars* were one of the most powerful revenue collecting agencies and a characteristic feature of the period was the growth in

15 Firminger, W. K. (Ed.), The Letter Copy Book of the Resident at the Durbar at Murshidabad, 1769-1770, Calcutta, 1919, p. xxv.

16 Proceedings, dated 13th December, 1770, Purnea Letter No. 118.

17 Firminger, W. K.—The Fifth Report, Vol. I, Calcutta (1917) p. 393.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 339.

their powers. A class of zamindars existed in Purnea from quite an early time but whereas formerly they were advantageously utilised by the *Faujdars* to promote the welfare of the people, now with the weakening of the office of the *Faujdars*, they undertook to perform certain police, judicial and executive functions which of right did not belong to them. According to Saiyad Ghulam Hussain Khan they should have always been put under strict surveillance. To quote his words,

> 'It is deemed an undeniable truth amongst the men of sense of this land, and it was a standing rule amongst the princes of these kingdoms, that no trust is to be reposed in the words of a zamindar, not even in his most solemn promises and treaties, as they are, to a man, a refractory, short sighted, faithless set of people, that mind nothing but present interest, and requires always a strict hand'.[19]

During the weak and vigourless administration of the *Faujdars* in the post-Plassey period the security of life and property of the people fell a prey to numerous variety of oppression and tyranny and incentive to agriculture was completely absent. According to G. G. Ducarel, the foremost cause of the decay of the wealth and produce of Purnea was that the *raiyats* and others who had been drawn to Purnea by the mild government of Saif Khan and Saiyad Ahmad Khan, 'quitted the country again in numbers when they no longer found that benefit and the land they occupied went to waste'.[20]

To summarise, during the years following the Battle of Plassey political as well as economic degeneration stalked through not only Purnea but the whole of Bengal. The land and people were subjected to weak and corrupt administrative organisation. While the *Faujdars* before 1757 refused to submit a major part of the collected revenue to the provincial treasury and spent the same in the district itself, their successors more than once plundered the people of Purnea to satisfy their own greed as well as the demands of the provincial rulers. While formerly the *Faujdars* kept the zamindars under their strict control,[21] the

19 Sair, Vol. II, p. 204.

20 Proceedings, dated 13th December 1770, Purnea Letter No. 118.

21 Many instances are on record when *Faujdars* took prompt steps to bring erring *zamindars* under effective control. Saiyad Ahmad Khan chastised Md. Jalil, a *zamindar*, for his rebellious attitude and later on his *zamindari* was restored to his family only on the condition that welfare of the people would get due attention (Sair, Vol. II—141-143).

Similarly Saif Khan dispossessed Durjay Narayan, proprietor of Kumaripur Estate, of his property for his disobedience (Buchanan, Francis—An Account of the District of Purnea 1809-10, Patna (1928), p. 479).

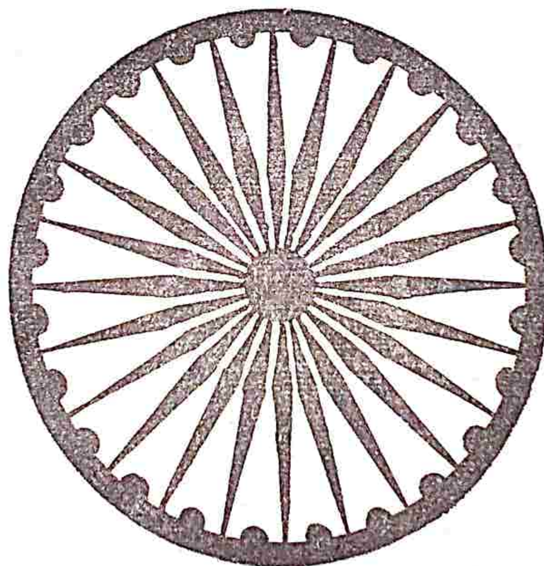
latter now acquired great powers and did all to enrich themselves at the cost of the peasantry. Thus, after 1757 the prosperity of Purnea dwindled and we have evidence that it came to be utilised merely as a ground where the Subadars of Bengal wanted to dump their rivals. The *Faujdary* of Purnea was no longer a coveted possession. In short the political turmoils of the period in Purnea were eating into her economic vitality.

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